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SUBJECT: Zimbabwe International Trade Fair 2003 -- Low
Turnout, Low Participation, Low Morale

SENSITIVE

11. (U) Summary: The Zimbabwe International Trade Fair (ZITF) is the country's premier trade event and was once a regional and international showcase. Three years ago, the number of both local and international exhibitors started to decline due to economic and political problems. This year saw the worst attendance since independence in 1980, with the ZITF boasting only five African countries and two overseas exhibitors from a peak of 52 countries in 1997. Even South Africa, Zimbabwe's largest trading partner, did not participate for the first time since independence. No head of state officially opened the fair, also a first in ZITF history. End summary.

Fuel Crisis Affects Local Participation

12. (SBU) The acute shortage of fuel negatively affected participation by most local exhibitors and visitors to the fair. A visit to the show by the Embassy's economic/commercial section indicated lower exhibitor figures than those announced by official media. For example, three exhibition halls, normally a hive of activity, were completely closed and another hall for small-scale farmers was less than half full. No livestock was exhibited in the agricultural section of the fair, partly due to the uncontrolled foot and mouth disease outbreak. Many press reports indicated that local exhibitors were prevented from taking up their exhibition space when they failed to source fuel to make the trip. Despite attempts by the Bulawayo government to minimize bad publicity by trying to disperse fuel queues along the main travel routes, visitors were greeted by kilometer-long lines of motorists at almost every fuel station.

International Exhibitors Largely Fail to Participate...

13. (U) Through 2001, the Embassy regularly maintained a stand at the show, including 10 or so U.S. companies and several individual states. At this year's Fair, no U.S. company exhibited and most participants were small- to medium-sized local companies. We did not observe a single foreign business executive. Among African countries, only Kenya, Botswana, Nigeria, Angola and Ghana attended, while global participation was limited to Turkey and the Peoples Republic of China. (Government press reported Austria's participation, but we only witnessed a local company that markets Austrian solar panels occupying the country's former stand.) Normally high-profile regional and international figures -- as well as Angolan president Dos Santos, originally scheduled to open the show -- skipped the Fair, yet another indication of the serious economic and political problems the country is facing. (Angola's Prime Minister represented the country's president after an expected last minute cancellation.) Even the Government of South Africa, Zimbabwe's largest trading partner, did not bother to attend.

... While Local Politicians Flock to the Show

14. (SBU) Despite press reports that all accommodation in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe's second city, was booked as a result of the show, attendance at the Fair was extremely low-key. In fact, Zimbabwean government officials seemed to outnumber business people. The Ministry of Finance Permanent Secretary, who shared a ride from the airport to the Fair

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with us, did not even attempt to offer a positive outlook. Instead, he fretted that South Africa was soon likely to switch off electricity supplies to Zimbabwe due to lack of payment.

COMMENT

15. (SBU) The dismal attendance and participation at ZITF is one more example of an economy in retreat. Despite the GOZ's attempts to spin this as another glorious success, few

exhibitors, including those from South Africa, saw any advantage by making the journey to a moribund event.

Sullivan